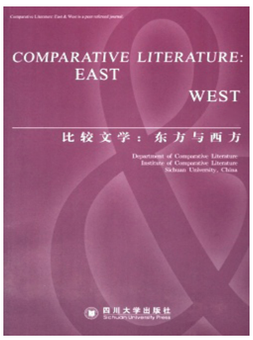

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Comparative Literature: East & West

Series 1

ISSN: (Print) 2572-3618 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcle19

From Cinderella to Medusa: Duality and Antithesis in Sylvia Plath's Poetic Persona

Hong Wang

To cite this article: Hong Wang (2011) From Cinderella to Medusa: Duality and Antithesis in Sylvia Plath's Poetic Persona, Comparative Literature: East & West, 14:1, 77-85, DOI: 10.1080/25723618.2011.12015552

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2011.12015552

© 2011 Sichuan University. Published by China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House.

Published online: 06 Aug 2018.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 30

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rcle20

From Cinderella to Medusa: Duality and Antithesis in Sylvia Plath's Poetic Persona

Wang, Hong

Guangdong University of Foreign Studies

中文摘要：在西方文坛上，女性诗人往往要面对"女性"与"诗人"的双重身份之间的冲突，这种冲突在普拉斯（Sylvia Plath）的诗歌里留下了十分明显的印迹。本文从分析普拉斯少年时期的诗歌入手，展示她的诗歌中人物性格上的双重性，并分析这种双重性如何在诗人后期诗歌中得到进一步的表现，同时揭示了普拉斯诗歌源于双重性的另一个重要特征：诗歌中所展现的矛盾冲突总是处于一种悬而未决的胶着状态。这种状态体现的是诗人在其短暂的一生中，追求生活与艺术完美统一的心路历程。

For generations in the past, being female was almost the equivalent of being domestic, and the roles of wife and mother, more than anything else, conferred status to women. What has often been ignored is the inherent conflict between the role of a writer and the traditional roles imposed on a woman, which renders a "normal life" almost impossible and the finding of "a room of one's own" difficult. When the Muse, who is given the role of inspiring male poets, attempts to find her own voice, she has more than her gift for writing to consider. Denise Levertov, Elaine Feinstein, Anne Stevenson and Fleur Adcock, among others, have variously expressed the frustration caused by the demands of domestic aspects of life and their role as wife/mother. "A room of one's own" can no more be taken for granted than the identity of the "One". Alicia Ostriker cuts to the core of the matter with the remark, "to be a creative woman in a gender-polarized culture is to be a divided self". [1]

For Sylvia Plath, a gifted and precocious poet who began to publish in her teens,

?1994-2014 China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House. All rights reserved. http://www.cnk

the awareness of a divided self came early, and how to come to terms with the antithesis implicit in the divided self remains a predicament till the end of her life. Furthermore, the circumstances of Plath's life and her unique personality reinforced the "incoherence between self and object, and the chaos that grows out of that incoherence".[2] The quest for identity has more obstacles to overcome than the traditional division between womanhood and intellectual pursuit. The relationship between mother and daughter, for instance, is also for Plath a bond that paradoxically both inspires and inhibits artistic creation. Consequently, the poetic persona that has emerged in her late poems is burdened with duality and antagonism. The desire for "a transfiguration which will dissolve the limits of the self", which Lavers has found in many of Plath's poems "in an open or latent manner" [3] often leads to ambivalence. The poetic persona is not allowed a simple resolution to the duality and antithesis inherent in the struggle for a coherent and independent self.

The predicament faced by Plath's poetic persona can be traced back to the early poems collected in the Juvenilia section in *Collected Poems* edited by Ted Hughes. Although the Juvenilia poems are generally considered evidences of Plath's apprenticeship as a poet and of lower quality than her mature poems, they "offer insight into the early seeds of some of her later concerns", as Jo Gill observes.[4] Indeed, the fairy-tale figure in one of the Juvenilia poems, "Cinderella"[5], can be seen as a prototype of the poetic persona that emerges in the late poem "In Plaster" written in 1961.

In "Cinderella", we can catch a glimpse of the self of a female poet divided by the desire for artistic creation and the equally strong desire to meet the demands of a woman's existence prescribed by society. The opening line of the poem "The prince leans to the girl in scarlet heels" adds a new dimension to the titled fairy-tale figure Cinderella. In the version most widely known today, Cinderella wears little glass slippers when she is in the disguise of a princess, and it is the fallen glass slipper that has led the Prince to Cinderella in the end, its transparent purity an unmistakable symbol of feminine virtue. When Plath has her Cinderella wear shoes with "scarlet heels", she superimposed on Cinderella another fairy-tale figure: Karen in Andersen's "Red Shoes". Possibly one among the most miserable characters in Andersen's stories, Karen, a poor motherless child like Cinderella, could not resist the lure of red shoes, especially after she saw them on the feet of a little princess. Once she has the chance to own a pair of red shoes, she wears it to attend church services, which became, in the logic of the fairy tale, an unpardonable sin and for

?1994-2014 China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House. All rights reserved. http://www.cn

which she is cruelly punished. The red shoes dance on its own accord day and night, dragging Karen along. Eventually she had her feet amputated and the red shoes dance away with her feet, a scene which could rival scenes from many Hollywood scare movies. While Cinderella's glass slippers signify feminine virtue and are instrumental in gaining her the ultimate happiness a woman can hope for, Karen's red shoes externalize the dangerous desire in her heart, causing her untold misery. When Cinderella wears red shoes instead of glass slippers, her identity becomes antithetical: she is the virtuous ash-girl about to turn into a real princess, but her "scarlet heels" give away her forbidden desires.

In Andersen's fairy-tale, Karen obviously misbehaves when she pays more attention to her red shoes than church services and when she leaves her dying adopted mother to attend a dance ball. However, the severity of the punishment may seem inexplicable for a modern reader and the symbolic reference of the red shoes may remain enigmatic. Rather than the motif of "sin and punishment", the popular imagination has more readily seized upon the image of the red shoes as symbolic of a certain force that propels the wearer irresistibly, even to the extent of self-destruction, to strive for a certain destiny in life. In Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's 1948 film *The Red Shoes*, Karen's red shoes have found their modern context: dancing shoes worn by a beautiful ballerina torn between artistic ambition and romantic love. In this context the red shoes are obviously symbolic of the fiery power of artistic creation. As Christodoulides shows, Plath saw the film in 1950 and "the dual role a woman must forgo to adopt only one: the dancer has to choose between dancing or loving a man; between artistic creation and domesticity" resonates with her own predicament.[6] We may say it is the fire of creative imagination that has turned Cinderella's shoes scarlet.

Plath situates her Cinderella in the smooth movement of the dance floor, the glass palace hall "revolving" with the music and the guests "gliding into light like wine". In the arms of the prince, Cinderella dances to the music, "[her] green eyes slant, / hair flaring in a fan of silver". This is the moment in which the duality in Cinderella's self is hold together. In Christodoulides's analysis, Plath manages to compromise the two roles in this poem: "she keeps the ash-girl trait in disguise and exploits the creative ability, dancing, as the power bestowed upon her by the red shoes."[7] However, this moment cannot last. While the red shoes motif guides the girl to the infinity of dances, the imperative of the ash-girl princess motif stipulates that the dance stops as the clock strikes at midnight. The fairy-tale Cinderella duly rushes

?1994-2014 China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House. All rights reserved. http://www.cnki

away from the dance hall, leaving the glass slipper as her identity trait, so to speak. When Plath's Cinderella "hears the caustic ticking of the clock", she "all at once / Guilt-stricken halts, pales, clings to the prince". The poem ends with the suspense created by this tableau. The antithetical forces in Plath's Cinderella results in a dilemma: if she leaves her prince now, he may not be able or would not want to find her again, since her red shoes, unlike the glass slipper, lead away from rather than towards love and marriage; if she stays with the dancing couples, the disguise she is in may fall apart, revealing the shabbily dressed ash-girl underneath the borrowed identity of a princess. In any case the double dualities (the ash-girl / princess and the ash-girl in red shoes) cannot be maintained.

Cinderella in red shoes would be an apt image for Plath as a young girl. In high school Plath realized that to be accepted by her peers and the opposite sex, she should be careful not to appear like a "brainy girl". Even though she cherished an ambition to become a writer and had published a short story in a teenage magazine, "she had learned to hide behind a façade of light hearted wit and pretended naivety".[8] Underneath such a façade is "a profound uncertainty about the possibility of reconciling womanhood and intellect" that Lavers has found in Plath's poetry.[9] The duality kept together by Cinderella, poised on the edge of transfiguration in her red shoes, bifurcated into two distinct selves as Plath the poet reaches maturity.

In one of her early adult poems, "Two Sisters of Persephone",[10] the opposition between womanhood and intellect is uncompromisingly sharp. In Greek mythology, Persephone unites the double functions of the Queen of the Underworld and vegetation goddess, the former associated with darkness and sterility, the latter light and fertility. In Plath's poem, the duality in Persephone splits and resides in two sisters: one works in her dark room, stereotypical of the dry intellectual whose enterprise being "barren"; the other lies outside in the brightness of the sun, symbolic of the fecundity of womanhood, whose labour "bears a king". The womanly sister finds in her company beautiful red poppies that bloom in the sun and is proud of her motherhood; the intellectual sister has only worms in the grave as her "husband" and is denied womanhood altogether. The poem was written in 1956, the year she met and married Ted Hughes. Perhaps more than ever before in her life, Plath felt the pressure to "cope with every sphere of a woman's existence as then prescribed", including "to put her partner's life and objectives before her own",[11] as if Cinderella has taken off her red shoes, settling for the fulfillment of womanhood, and the intellectual sister is relegated to the dark room to remain virgin and "no woman".

?1994-2014 China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House. All rights reserved. http://www.cn

About five years later, the two sisters of Persephone co-exist in the poetic persona of "In Plaster",[12] one inside the other as Plath forsakes the voice of an outsider who watches the two sisters moving towards irreconcilable destinies. The two selves of the I-speaker, the "new absolutely white person and the old yellow one", correspond to the womanly sister in the sun and the intellectual one in the dark room respectively. The crucial difference is that in this poem it is the intellectual sister who is winning out. With the awareness "[w]ithout me, she wouldn't exist", the hidden power of the yellow person "bloomed" out of the "whiteness and beauty" of the white person "like a rose", an image symbolic of life and associated with the womanly sister, and the colour of which reminds us of the red shoes of Cinderella. As in "Cinderella", the divided self is hold in a duality torn between antithetical forces, ready to fracture at any moment. In Annas's words, "to see yourself trapped between two sets of mutually exclusive alternative, neither of which fits [...], is to live in a circus hall of mirrors, where the self is distorted, disguised, or shattered into slivers of reflection. But it is the struggle to be whole that engages the poet and empowers the poems."[13] At the end of "In Plaster", although the two selves are still locked in an interdependent but antagonistic relationship, the inner intellectual self of the writer is gathering strength: "One day I shall manage without her / and she'll perish with emptiness then, and begin to miss me".

The wish to "manage without her" is also a powerful motivating force for the poetic persona in "Medusa", only this time "her" is the mother figure personified in a jelly fish like sea-creature. The sea has a powerful hold over Sylvia Plath's imagination. In her journal dating May 11, 1958, on Mother's Day after a late night call from her mother, Plath wrote about the importance of sea imagery, describing it as "a central metaphor for my childhood, my poems and the artist's subconscious".[14] She also imagined her mind (as a poet) peopled with "magics and monsters", among which were "sea-bearded bodies".[15] One such "sea-bearded" monsters makes its appearance in "Medusa",[16] which is generally recognized as the female counterpart of the monstrous male figure in "Daddy".[17] It is also more or less a critical consensus that "Medusa" deals with the troubled mother-daughter relationship. In such images as "barnacled umbilicus" and "placenta" and when Medusa's body is described as "Bottle in which I live", the maternal connotations are all too obvious. Furthermore, Plath's separateness from and connectedness with her mother at the time the poem was written also contribute to the theme of "maternal haunting" as Norris puts it.[18] While they were separated physically by the Atlantic Ocean, Plath

?1994-2014 China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House. All rights reserved. http://www.cnk

and her mother were also connected through the "Atlantic cable" and constant exchanges of letters, so that the lines "I didn't call you at all. / Nevertheless, nevertheless / You steamed to me over the sea" sound biographical in implication.

As is the case with Cinderella in red shoes, the Mother/Medusa figure is invested with a double identity: a jelly-fish like sea-creature able to inflict pain through its sting and a Gorgon monster able to cause death through paralysis. Critical views most often focus on the poetic persona's struggle to escape from the stifling hold of Mother/Medusa, emphasizing the negative portrayal of the mother and the antagonism in the mother-daughter relationship. When Judith Kroll's seminal study of this poem identified Medusa with Plath's mother Aurelia, Ted Hughes insisted on the deletion of this identification if the work got published for he was afraid that what Kroll had written about "Medusa" "would quite possibly cause Aurelia's death".[19] Since a biographical reading of the poem seems unavoidable, we might as well delve into Plath's journal for clues to the nature of the troubled mother-daughter relationship.

In December 1958, after a session with her doctor Beuscher the previous day and reading Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" in the morning, Plath went into a rather extensive self-analysis in her journal, tracing her anxiety and rejection fear to the "approval from mother" which "has been equated for [her] with love".[20] The words "I feel her disapproval. But I feel it countries away too"[21] obviously refer to their epistolary communication across the Atlantic, expressing a sentiment that resurfaced in "Medusa" in the lines, "In any case, you are always there" and "You steamed to me over the sea". Many people may be struck by the wish for her mother's death in the journal. However, in the context of the journal, such a wish should not be interpreted as an expression of hatred, for the death of the mother is seen as a precondition for what John Wood describes as "the birth of an independent and unyielding identity".[22] As Plath wrote: "I wish her death so I could be sure of what I am; so that what feelings I have, even though some resembles her, are really my own."[23] On the other hand, if the mother is a source of neurotic anxiety, she is also a powerful "Muse" for Plath's poetry: "Writing, then, was a substitute for myself: if you don't love me, love my writing & love me for my writing."[24] Underneath her complicated feelings for the strong tie between mother and daughter is the antithetical forces of Medusa and *the Muse* in "The Disquieting Muses"[25] written at about the same time as the journal above mentioned.

Biographical details may help us locate the underpinnings of a poet's creative

?1994-2014 China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House. All rights reserved. http://www.cnk

imagination, especially with poets like Sylvia Plath. However, as Anne Sexton rightly suggests, when we come to Plath the poet, "what matters is her poems", not the story of her life.[26] If we dispense with the biographical perspective and dig into the language and imagery of "Medusa", what comes out is the tug of war between the antithetical forces of attachment and rejection. The poem could be divided into two parts along the line of attachment and rejection. As is mentioned previously, critical attention tends to be drawn to the theme of rejection, highlighting the desire and the struggle of the speaker to be free of the paralyzing clutches of Mother/Medusa. What is so often down-played is the strong force of attachment in the first part of the poem. The images used in the first four stanzas suggest that the poetic persona probably envisions herself as a fisherman at sea, with Medusa the jelly fish "in my keel's shadow", "at the end of my line", causing waves to up leap "[to] my water rod". Although Medusa is by implication a monster whose ugliness could turn the beholder to stone, its presence in the poem is associated with life-giving and maternal images. The encounter between Medusa and the speaker has a certain gentleness in it, evidenced by such expressions as "tremulous breath" and "dazzling and grateful / Touching and sucking". If Medusa seeks out the speaker and is "always there", the speaker also feels an irresistible force which orientates towards Medusa: "my mind winds to you / Old barnacled umbilicus". The attachment seems to be mutual until we reach the last word in this part: "sucking", which leads to the dominant sensation of enclosure and passivity felt by the speaker in the next four stanzas.

The force of rejection is equally strong, if not stronger than the force of attachment when the speaker declares, "I shall take no bite of your body" and pushes off the "eely tentacles". Towards the end of the poem, maternal bond reaches a breaking point and rejection seems to have an upper hand over attachment in the tug of war. Nevertheless, the last line, far from a "declaration of independence", provides an antithetical resolution hidden in the ambiguity of language: "There is nothing between us" implies both fusion and separation. Even if the umbilicus is cut, the mother remains the source of the child's life; the birth of an independent identity carries with it indelible traces of its origin. As in so many other poems by Plath, love can only be "achieved in the teeth of opposition, in spite of the past, or of terrific obstacles".[27]

Susan Barssnett reads "Medusa" in the context of "family poems", and points out that together with its counterpart "Daddy", this poem seems to signal an important step in the development of Plath's poetic persona since after these poems children took over fathers/mothers to become the emphasis of Plath's family poems, the

?1994-2014 China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House. All rights reserved. http://www.cnk

complexity of feelings concerning the mother from the daughter's point view replaced by "a passionate mother-love in the detailed beauty of imagery".[28] The ambivalent tension that holds the dual forces of attachment and rejection in the last line of "Medusa" gives way to a beautifully moving closure in Plath's last poem "Edge" in which the dead woman folded her children:

> [...] back into her body as petals
> Of a rose close when the garden
>
> Stiffens and odors bleed
> From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower. [29]

This woman is, of course, not the mother, but the persona in "Medusa" who has reached motherhood herself. She is also Cinderella who has struggled to keep dancing in red shoes in the arms of the prince, and the yellow person blooming out as a dazzling red rose. The duality and antithesis of Plath's poetic persona dissolved in the woman "perfected" by death: "We have come so far, it is over",[30] a sad echo of Plath's own struggle and death.

Notes:

[1] Alicia Ostriker, *Stealing the Language* (Boston: Beacon, 1987) 60, quoted in Janice Markey, *A Journey into the Red Eye* (London: The Women's Press, 1993) 133.

[2] Cameron Northhouse and Thomas P. Walsh, *Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton: A Reference Guide* (Boston: Hall & Co., 1974) v.

[3] Annette Lavers, "The World as Icon: On Sylvia Plath's Themes", *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium*, ed. Charles Newman (Bloomington & London: Indiana U. P., 1970) 119.

[4] Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008) 30.

[5] Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 303-304. The collection will hereon be referred to as *CP*.

[6] Nephie Christodoulides, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking: Motherhood in Sylvia Plath's Work* (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2005) 45.

[7] Ibid., 44.

[8] Markey, *Journey into the Red Eye*, 135-36.

[9] Lavers, "World as Icon", 131.

[10] *CP*, 31-32.

[11] Markey, *Journey into the Red Eye*, 136.

[12] *CP*, 158-160.

?1994-2014 China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House. All rights reserved. http://www.cnk

[13] Pamela J. Annas, *A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Greenwood, 1988) 61.

[14] Karen V. Kubil, ed. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000) 381.

[15] Ibid.

[16] *CP*, 224-26.

[17] The sequential order of the two poems, "Medusa" following "Daddy" in *Collected Poems*, tends to reinforce this impression, though in Sylvia Plath's own ordering of the *Ariel* poems, the former is separated from the latter by six other poems.

[18] Pamela Norris, *Words of Love: Passionate Women from Heloise to Sylvia Plath* (London: Harper, 2006) 364.

[19] Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); edition with updated foreword, (N.p.: Sutton Publishing, 2007), xxx. Of course Aurelia Plath did not die of the pain caused by the poem. In a letter to Kroll after she had read *Chapters in a Mythology*, Aurelia revealed that she had been aware of the Aurelia/Medusa connection since it "had been a 'private joke' between her and Sylvia" (ibid, xxxv).

[20] Kubil, *Journals*, 448.

[21] Ibid., 449.

[22] David John Wood, *A Critical Study of the Birth Imagery of Sylvia Plath* (Lewiston: E. Mellen, 1992), quoted in Christodoulides, *Out of the Cradle*, 223.

[23] Kubil, *Journals*, 449.

[24] Ibid.

[25] *CP*, 74-76.

[26] Anne Sexton, "The Barfly Ought to Sing", *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium*, ed. Charles Newman (Bloomington & London: Indiana U. P., 1970) 179.

[27] Lavers, "World as Icon", 129.

[28] Susan Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to the Poetry*, 2nd. ed., (London: Palgrave, 2005) 92-95.

[29] *CP*, 273.

[30] *CP*, 272.

WANG Hong, Ph.D. in Linguistics and Applied Linguistic from Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (Guangzhou). She is currently professor of English at the above mentioned university. Her research interests include Shakespeare studies, English poetry and stylistics. She has published several literature textbooks and two books on drama and discourse analysis.

?1994-2014 China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House. All rights reserved. http://www.cnk